



17 February 2010

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia

Email: [fadt.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:fadt.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Madam/Sir,

### **CPSU Submission to Inquiry into matters relating to the Torres Strait region**

The PSU Group of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) represents over 200,000 employees in the Australian Public Service, the Australian Government public sector, the ACT Public Service, the Northern Territory Public Service, and other sectors including telecommunications, call centres, employment services and radio and television broadcasting. The CPSU is the principal union representing employees of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) and other federal government agencies with a presence on the Torres Strait Islands.

The CPSU has prepared this submission after consultation with CPSU members at the Torres Strait Regional Authority. CPSU members have raised specific concerns about health and safety in their work, particularly when it involves interaction with Papua New Guinea (PNG) nationals who travel between the PNG's Western Province and the Torres Strait. They also have broader concerns about the adequate resourcing of health services in the Torres Strait.

The CPSU notes that the TSRA's submission to this Inquiry has raised similar concerns. The TSRA's recommendation 2 asks that:

*Commonwealth and Queensland Governments commit to a 50 percent reduction by 2013 in the number of presentations of PNG nationals at Queensland Health Clinics in the Torres Strait.*

### **Health and Safety of TSRA employees**

TSRA employees who travel to remote communities have significant concerns for their health and safety. Employees working in this environment are potentially at risk from diseases, such as tuberculosis, that are carried by visiting PNG nationals. This situation is of concern for the general population of the Torres Strait, as the TSRA submission outlines in detail.

CPSU members in many Australian Government agencies are often required to undertake difficult and dangerous work. Our members frequently have to travel long distances, be exposed to aggressive customers, work with hazardous substances, and patrol Australia's borders. Our union has experience in dealing with dangerous working conditions, and appreciates that certain types of work will inherently involve practical risks.

The CPSU recommends to the inquiry that it addresses the exposure to diseases brought to the Torres Strait by PNG nationals as an Occupational Health and Safety issue for TSRA employees.

## **Adequate resourcing of local health services**

The health and safety of CPSU members working in this environment is inextricably linked to the health services that are available to the communities in which they live.

CPSU members understand and appreciate the humanitarian basis upon which the Queensland Health Service chooses to treat PNG nationals who present for treatment. Nevertheless it seems apparent that the clinics in Torres Strait communities are taking on these tasks without the necessary resources for their facilities. For example, health clinics in Torres Strait communities generally do not have isolation wards for contagious patients despite, as previously pointed out, a number of PNG nationals seeking treatment having contagious diseases.

The Australian Government has stated that it wants to end the 'blame game' between the states, territories and the Commonwealth on health services. The CPSU asks that the inquiry directly address the challenge of ensuring adequate funding to the Torres Strait region's health services – regardless of whether they are provided by the Queensland state government, or by the Commonwealth directly.

The CPSU recommends that if local health services are expected to take on particular tasks then they should be funded for them. Specifically

- They should be adequately funded to meet the particular needs of the local communities.
- The clinics should also be adequately funded to cope with the treatment of PNG nationals that they undertake, particularly in respect of possible contagious diseases.

Employees of the TSRA, and people living in Torres Strait communities, should not be expected to just accept that they may be exposed to contagious diseases. More broadly where health services are being provided to PNG nationals those services should be properly and explicitly funded.

The CPSU thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment on these issues. Should you wish to discuss this submission any further the contact person is Melissa Donnelly Senior Legal Officer CPSU [melissa.donnelly@cpsu.org.au](mailto:melissa.donnelly@cpsu.org.au) or (02) 8204 6971.

Yours sincerely,

Nadine Flood  
**Deputy Secretary**